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ABSTRACT

A twelve-hour program focusing on a day in jail which was organized by the Kean College departments of Fine Arts, Sociology, and English provided students with some concepts of what a day in jail is really like, and helped them to understand the necessity of creativity--study, writing, acting, painting, or even protesting--for survival. Inspired by the literary and artistic works of a jail inmate sentenced for life, the program included the showing of a compelling videotaped interview of this man, an exhibit of prison art work, the playing of a record made by a prison singing group, speeches by three representatives of the Fortune Society--two by former prison inmates and the third by the society's director, a panel discussion, a series of dramatized scenes from prison life, and a reading presented by five members of a reformatory theater group. Since then, some projects involving creative writing classes, libraries, art classes, and drama productions have begun and are being enlarged upon at several New Jersey prisons. (JM)

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A Day in Jail: New Vistas

The title of this paper, "A Day in Jail: New Vistas," does not mean I'm about to tell you how I spent a day in jail and experienced a revelation. It does mean that "A Day in Jail: Rehabilitation through the Arts" was the title of what proved to be an unusual and meaningful program organized by the Fine Arts, Sociology, and English Departments at Kean College of New Jersey last November. The purpose of the program was twofold: to give our students some feeling of what a day in jail is really like, and to help them understand how survival behind bars so often depends on some form of creativity, whether studying, writing, acting, painting, or protesting. From the students' reactions that day and afterwards, I think we really did accomplish what we set out to do. We did give them a sense of being in jail for a day or even for years, and by so doing we did open up "new vistas" for them. We made them aware, for instance, of questions many of them had never before thought of, such as what does a term in prison do to a human being? If it destroys him, is this the fault of our prison system? If he emerges rehabilitated, is the credit due to the system or to some triggering of his own latent capabilities? But that isn't all. Because of this program we've also, I believe, opened up some "new vistas," although on a much smaller scale, in one or two of New Jersey's prisons, and we're working now on increasing the size of these cracks in the wall.

By now, I expect, you must be asking how an English Department ever got involved with such a program. Let me explain. The

CS 201 402

preceding spring, Greg Armstrong, editor of George Jackson's Soledad Brother and Blood in Your Eye and author of a ~~forthcom-~~ "The Dragon Has Come" to be published next month by Harper and Row, ing book on Jackson, had come to our campus under English Department sponsorship to talk about Jackson as prisoner, writer, and friend. In the course of his moving description of Jackson as a man who had actually found freedom in chains, because in prison he had learned to read, think, and write more freely than most of us outside of prison ever dare, Greg mentioned another prisoner who had found release in writing, and in painting too--Tom Trantino, who was serving a life sentence in the Rahway, N. J. State Prison. When a feature article on Trantino and his book, Lock the Lock, published by Knopf this January, appeared soon after in the New York Times, we learned more about him and became still more interested. Ten years before, when only 25, but already an ex-convict and a drug addict, he was sentenced to death for allegedly taking part in the murder of two policemen. For the next 7 years, he was confined in the Death House at Trenton State Prison, until in 1971, when the death penalty was abolished, he was removed to Rahway. But during this period he changed, not because of prison, he says, but in spite of it; he was "transformed utterly," because even while on Death Row he began to read and to look at collections of pictures. Before long, he was writing and drawing, at first awkwardly, derivatively, than with a force and style all his own that impressed such people as Kurt Vonnegut, Joyce Carol Oates, Denise Levertov, Dwight MacDonald, and Allen Ginsberg. Now Knopf was publishing a book of his writings and drawings, and when we obtained some sample pages from his editor, we

were impressed too. Clearly, here was a New Jersey writer of whom a New Jersey college English department should take note, especially when the President of the College clipped the Times article, as ours did, and sent it to me with the query, "What can we do?"

Our initial response was to think of asking the cooperation of our Art Department, to organize a showing of Trantino's paintings while we set up a program on his writing. And this would have been interesting but hardly spectacular. As soon as we started planning, however, we encountered a series of accidents and problems which forced us to involve more people in our planning committee--which finally consisted of faculty and students from the Art, English, and Sociology Departments--; to become more inventive in our arrangements, and to realize that while we would continue to focus on Trantino as artist and writer, we could also achieve the much broader aims I've already mentioned. We could convey some sense of the whole prison experience in which Trantino's work is rooted, and we could explore the role of the written and spoken word in rehabilitating other New Jersey prisoners as well.

The first accident to determine our course was a lucky one. We discovered, when we approached the Art Department, that although they had not yet heard of Trantino, their Gallery Director was already planning a month-long show in November of work done at art classes in 3 New Jersey prisons--Clinton, Annandale, and Rahway. Our job, therefore, was simply to persuade the Gallery Director to include Trantino's work in her exhibit, and nothing could have been easier. As soon as she saw a few samples

she became so enthusiastic that she took over the whole complicated task of gathering a representative selection of his work, framing it, and hanging it. But this was only the beginning of our luck. For it was the wide scope of the exhibit that helped our committee to see how we could expand our scope as well, and it was the time and place of the exhibit that gave us a significant date and setting for our part of the program. Naturally, if the exhibit was to open in early November, our program, whatever it turned out to be, should take place at the same time, to celebrate the opening. It should also, of course, take place as close to the Gallery as possible; that is, in the big adjacent lobby, which hitherto no one had considered using, just because, as we all agreed, it looked too much like a prison. Now that gray prison look was appropriate. And even more appropriate, we realized, was the fact that Gallery and lobby were separated only by a glass wall with a wide door, so that the bold shapes and colors of the brightly lighted art show were constantly visible and accessible to anyone standing in the dark lobby. If we had tried, we could not have devised a more fitting symbol of the function of the creative spirit in opening up new worlds for prisoners everywhere, and I recommend just such a setting to anyone planning a similar program.

The trouble was, although we had a time and a setting, we still had no play and no star; and here it was the difficulty of the problem that pushed us into what I think was another happy invention. Our difficulty of course was the fact that the man whose writing had started all this was not available to come and talk to us. Our committee had indeed requested the State Com-

missioner of Institutions and Agencies to allow Trantino to leave Rahway for the day, but the negative we expected was what we got. Then it suddenly occurred to us that if we could not secure Trantino himself, perhaps we could secure his voice and image on videotape. After all, this was one of the points we wanted our program to make: that a man confined in prison can and must, if he is to remain human, find release in some of the various forms of art. Trantino knew this better than we did, and said it better too, when he wrote in Lock the Lock: "People who are isolated and oppressed create/ first because they have to/ and second because they must." He had created paintings which we had hanging in the Gallery; he had created a book, out of which some of our drama students would read superbly some wildly sad and funny passages; why couldn't he create a performance that would bring everything about him except his actual physical presence to a TV screen in the arts building lobby? At any rate, we decided to try to videotape an interview with him right in Rahway Prison, and to show the tape as the focal event of our Day in Jail.

Arranging for this interview naturally proved complicated and time-consuming; but in the end two young members of our Department, together with the Gallery Director and a videotape operator, were allowed to go to Rahway and film over an hour of talk with Trantino, and the result justified all our hopes. Not that the tape would ever win an Emmy. Yet even with an often unintelligible sound track and a sometimes blurry picture, it communicated with terrific force the personality of a man and the reality of his imprisonment. Because the gray walls behind Trantino in the picture

blended into the walls of the lobby, all of us, students and faculty, in the large audience seemed to be right there in prison with the group on the screen. We heard the intolerably high level of background noise that apparently is one of the maddening facts of prison life; it hurt our ears as well as theirs. Yet the man on the screen, obviously a born performer, responded to our interviewers' questions with such intensity of commitment to his art and writing, such deep concern for his fellow prisoners, and finally, such amazing wit, that it was clear he had managed to triumph over grayness, noise, and confinement. The reporter for our student newspaper summed up the effect of the interview when she wrote: "This man, who has been imprisoned for 11 years now, is blessed with an uncanny sense of the absurdities of his situation and can speak jokingly about them. He makes you laugh. This man, a talented and intelligent human being, is wasting his life away behind bars. That makes you cry."

But of course this videotape, however innovative and successful as a device, and however important as the focus of our Day in Jail, was still only an hour in a program that went on, with intervals, for 12. What about the rest of the day? Because we had wanted, as I said, to reach out beyond Trantino/to the experience of other prisoners, this was what we tried to do in the remainder of our program. Before the speeches by/the Kean College President and the Art Department chairman which opened the program, for instance, we played a record made by an excellent singing group from Rahway Prison, the Escorts. After the videotape,

three representatives of the Fortune Society spoke; first two ex-convicts, whose understated style contrasted marvelously with Trantino's flamboyance, told how their years in prison had simply reinforced their criminal tendencies; one of them, in fact, who had begun as an amateur safe-breaker, learned in jail to be a professional; then David Rothenberg, the Society's founder and executive director, described how like Trantino he had been transformed by the art of the word. A theatre director, he had directed a show called Fortune and Men's Eyes, which ran off Broadway a number of years ago, and had been so moved by this play, written by an ex-convict, about the brutality of prison life, that he gave up his theatre career to organize a Society intended to alert the American public to what goes on in our prisons, and to help men and women released from prison adjust to the outside world. The ex-convicts with him were men the Society had helped, who were now helping others.

Still another changed man was our afternoon speaker, Frank Bisignano, who introduced a panel discussion and a series of dramatized scenes from prison life organized by our Sociology Department. For Bisignano too the transforming force had been the written and spoken word, and what is more, the word as taught to him by Trantino. For Bisignano, an 8th grade drop-out, had been a neighbor of Trantino's on Death Row, where by passing books and notes, Trantino had taught him to spell, read, think, and write. Now released on parole, Bisignano is a top student at Trenton State College; he works in the public relations office there, writes on prisons for the Village Voice, and makes a tre-

mendous effect as a speaker by suddenly revealing, in his soft, polished voice, that he spent 12 years on Death Row. But just as effective, I should say, although less polished, were the two Kean College students, parolees from Rahway, who participated in the dramatizations I mentioned. Not only was their relish infectious as they acted out the typical prison food line-up, the typical sexual assault, the typical encounter with the tough guard, who naturally came off second-best; it clearly indicated that they too were finding release through a form of communication: in this case role-playing. They gave us a message: this is what being in jail is like; and they felt good doing it.

Which brings me to the last event of the day, the reading presented by five members of the Cell Block Theatre, all convicts at Yardville Reformatory. Mike DeLakian, the poet and ex-con who directs this group, told me that what got him into prison was drug addiction, but what saved him in prison was books and writing. "The high I used to get from heroin," he said, "I now get from words." And in helping the young men in Yardville to write, in training them to read their own poetry and some of his, he is helping them to save themselves. "Doing this," one of them told us that night, "makes me feel like a human being again." And listening to them made us realize once more, as we had all day, what it is for a human being to be in jail, and what hope of mental freedom, at least, there is in words.

So there were "new vistas" for us. But what about "new vistas" for the men and women in New Jersey's prisons? Here progress is small and slow, yet there's something. Our college has sponsored a creative writing workshop at Rahway this semester,

taught by Trantino, which we hope is the beginning of a regular and larger program there. One of the young teachers who interviewed Trantino is now serving as one of two civilian Executive Committee members of the Rahway Volunteer Services, which Trantino heads. Through correspondence with an art teacher, a former Kean College student, at the Clinton jail for women, we have encouraged creative writing classes there, a mimeographed monthly magazine, and now the beginnings of a library, for which we at Kean College are collecting poetry, Black literature, and Spanish books. On March 6 we organized an expedition of 150 of our students to go to Yardville to see a performance of <u>One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest</u>, put on by the Cell Block Theatre. We expect now to attend their productions regularly. And although there may be footlights between us and the prisoners, there will be no walls.